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ABSTRACT

This technical assistance paper answers the question, "How can quality education programs for young children be assured?" by addressing four issues: components of quality early childhood programs, measures to counteract pressures for inappropriate practices, types of early childhood programs, and program evaluation methods. The paper notes the following as recognized components of quality in the preschool setting: (1) a developmental philosophy; (2) integration of children; (3) flexible grouping; (4) teachers as facilitators; (5) individualization; (6) successful conflict management; (7) respect for the child; (8) effective communications; (9) choices in activities; (10) an appropriate physical environment; (11) integrated curriculum; and (12) support services for families. The paper suggests parent meetings to explain what is going on in the classroom as a way to counteract pressure from parents who want the classes to be conducted in ways that are developmentally inappropriate. Examples of what are considered inappropriate and appropriate practices are provided in the form of a checklist. The paper then briefly describes different types of early childhood programs. While suggesting that several methods of evaluation should be explored, the paper focuses on self-study, which may utilize specific instruments and may lead to accreditation. The paper concludes with a list of essential accreditation criteria, including: interactions among staff and children, developmentally appropriate learning experiences, teacher-parent interactions, and staff qualifications and development. Contains five references. (BAC)

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KENTUCKY PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Ensuring Quality Programs

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Introduction

Now that public schools are beginning to sponsor early childhood programs for children not yet in kindergarten, it is important for policy makers, parents and the general public to understand the difference between an early childhood program and a typical elementary classroom. If concerned adults expect rows of children quietly working at their desks, they might be somewhat surprised and perhaps even upset to see the busy hum of an early childhood classroom. What is it about early childhood programs that makes these classrooms different? How can quality educational programs for young children be assured? The following sections help to answer these questions by (1) identifying the components of quality early childhood programs, (2) presenting measures to counteract pressures for inappropriate practices, (3) highlighting types of early childhood programs, and (4) presenting methods of evaluating programs.

Easel painting is an everyday experience, a continuing opportunity for self-expression. In art there are many opportunities for children to cooperate in joint efforts.

Components Of Quality Early Childhood Programs

The first step in ensuring effective and developmentally appropriate programs is to recognize the components of "quality" in the preschool setting. These components include: a developmentalist philosophy, integration of children, flexible grouping, teachers as facilitators, individualization, successful conflict management, respect for the child, effective communications, choices in activities, an appropriate physical environment, integrated curriculum, and support services for families.

One difference between early childhood and elementary classes is the age of the children, but even more important than age is the philosophy underlying this approach to education. The aim of developmental education is to produce critical and creative thinkers (Elkind, 1989). Since developmentalists believe that children construct their own reality from encounters with their surroundings, the environment of an early childhood classroom is all important. The human environment is paramount but the physical environment is also an essential component of quality.

In an early childhood class children with special needs fit in with little difficulty. Young children do not think that people are all alike in the family and each person has unique abilities and needs. The stratification of ages found in the typical classroom to minimize differences is foreign to the young child's experience. Thus, children with differing needs are not seen as unusual. In fact, differences are valued since they offer variety to the class and provide jumping off places for learning more about the world.

In an early childhood class children form flexible groups according to interest. Although children differ in rates of development, all, except for those with substan-

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tial disabilities, can achieve at a high level. Thus children are not sorted according to perceived level of intelligence, and it makes little sense to talk of ability grouping.

Teachers as Facilitators

Rather than teaching in the traditional sense, an early childhood educator is a facilitator, a preparer of the environment, a guide and resource who helps expand upon the knowledge and skills that children bring to the classroom. This is done by providing a supportive environment, asking judicious questions and supplying developmentally appropriate materials and activities to stretch young minds.

Individualization

Understanding the varying needs, abilities and interests of the children, the teacher does not impart the same information to them all, nor expect the same response from each one. The program is individualized with the needs of each child in the group considered.

Conflict Management

The early childhood teacher is not a referee. Inevitable conflicts between youngsters are analyzed and the children helped to come to agreement on solutions that uphold the dignity of all participants. Conflicts are seen as opportunities for growth rather than interruptions of the routine.

Respect

Affection and respect are hallmarks of an early childhood class. Teachers and children respect each other and participate together, according to their abilities, in the work of the classroom. In a very real sense children feel that this classroom belongs to them; it is not just the teacher's.

Effective Communications

Respect for parents as their children's first teachers is also evidenced in the partnership between families and teachers and the frequent communication among all the adults concerned with the children. Notes and phone calls are not occasioned by behavior problems but by a desire to share interesting happenings and an aim to find out more about the child.

Home visits and parent teacher conferences provide formal vehicles for communication between families and teachers to supplement notes and more casual chats. Parents and teachers work as a team to increase the value of the child's learning experiences.

Choices

Choice is an essential element in the early childhood class, for only by exercising the freedom to choose can children develop responsibility. They are trusted to find activities that will help them to grow in understanding of some particular aspect of reality. Thus much of the day is spent in activities that are meaningful to the children themselves.

Appropriate Physical Environment

Books, puzzles, dolls, dress up clothes, art supplies, blocks, animals, science materials and manipulatives are arranged invitingly on open shelves or tables. There is equipment for exercising large muscles and space for children to move freely in the classroom. Centers are strategically placed to minimize interruptions of children's play.

Evidence of the teacher's respect for children is shown in the children's work displayed. For example, children's art may be posted by them at their own eye levels. Each such creation is bound to be unique, an outgrowth of an idea that the child has had. Bright splashes of paint on large paper, collages constructed of all types of materials, three dimensional artifacts made of clay, yarn, cloth or wood are all attractively arranged where children can easily see them.

Integrated Curricula

While planning, the teacher is aware of the various curricular areas, however, the curriculum of an early childhood class is not divided into areas such as math and science, social studies, reading, music, physical education and art. Knowledge is not compartmentalized. While the teacher may try to balance the curriculum so that children are exposed to various aspects of the world, boys and girls are simply interested in learning.

Whole Language. An early childhood teacher understands that language in all its components is vital for young children. Speaking and listening are the basis on which reading and writing will some day be built and as such must be emphasized. The teacher gives children many opportunities to talk both informally and in a group. Children also have frequent times when listening is emphasized and vocabulary built in a natural way.

Literature is an important part of each day. Stories are read and acted out. Flannel boards, magnetic figures and puppets are used so that children can further interpret the stories. Children may draw pictures to illustrate literature and they may dictate stories of their own for the teacher or aide to print under their drawings. Some children will be able to write the words themselves but this is not emphasized over other activities.

Reading will come in its own good time when the children are ready. For now it is more important that children develop a love for literature and an understanding that reading is a valuable activity that they will some day achieve. It should be noted that a formal phonics program (where all the children study a letter of the day) has no place in an early childhood setting. Instead, the letters of a child's name or other pertinent words might be mentioned in a meaningful context.

Mathematics. Children begin to explore the world of mathematics by using many types of manipulatives. Brightly colored pattern blocks to arrange in pretty designs, to sort, count, match and classify are attractively displayed. Puzzles and unit blocks are available for practice in such skills as matching parts with wholes and construction.

Music. Music should also be included daily. Children sing, listen to music and play rhythm instruments. They dance and move their bodies in response to the music. They make up songs and sing these creations to their friends. A song could be the clue that clean up time is about to begin or it's time to wash hands for snack.

Physical Activity. Along with music, literature, art and drama, physical activity is an essential element in this class. The teacher understands the need for young children to move, to be physically active, and provides opportunities, preferably outside, for small bodies to stretch their muscles. There is equipment for climbing, swinging and balancing available and plenty of space for children to run and to bounce balls.

Support Services

As all children are different, so are their needs and the needs of their families. Health and developmental screenings of children may discover needs which may not be addressed in the classroom, but

should be referred to community agencies. Financial or other problems in the family may necessitate referrals to social services and counseling. Quality early childhood programs have mechanisms in place to help parents seek and find support services as needed.

Counteracting Pressure For Inappropriate Practice

Sometimes an early childhood teacher will find a great deal of pressure from parents and the public, perhaps even from people in the schools, to conduct the early childhood class in ways that are clearly inappropriate. It can be hard for an inexperienced teacher to go against this pressure. Sometimes the pressure is more perceived than real. In any case, it is important that the teacher help parents and others understand why worksheets and other developmentally inappropriate practices are not sanctioned in the class. Refer to Figure 1 for additional examples of appropriate and inappropriate practices as adapted from NAEYC (Bredekamp, 1986).

It might be a good idea to have a parent meeting with a videotape or slide show that explains what is going on in the early childhood classroom. There have been many articles written to help such a teacher. It would be valuable to keep a file of position papers and other articles from the "experts" to help a teacher under pressure convince the public that the developmental approach is worthwhile. Figure 2 is a sample of articles useful to have on file.

INAPPROPRIATE PRACTICE

- A preponderance of teacher-directed lessons
- Long periods of sitting for children
- Predrawn pictures for children to color
- Children copying a model made by the teacher
- Isolated skill development
- Rote memorization and drill emphasized
- Curriculum divided into subjects
- All children participate in all activities
- Children walk in straight lines
- Children are retained at grade level
- Intellectual development is paramount
- Teachers spend much time enforcing rules
- Children are evaluated against a group norm
- Standardized tests are used for placement
- Limited choice of activities for children
- Tangible rewards are given for "good behavior" behavior
- "Right" answers for questions
- Limited physical activity

APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

- Teaching is child-centered
- Curriculum is geared to children's interests
- Children's work is displayed predominately
- Choices are available much of the time
- There are many manipulatives
- Group times are short
- Soft elements are present
- Thinking is valued
- Open-ended questions are asked
- Children's ideas are respected
- A cozy retreat is available
- Schedule is balanced and flexible
- Activities are within children's reach
- Differences are valued
- Atmosphere is friendly
- Physical activity is scheduled daily
- Sand and water play are frequently available
- Expectations are high but realistic

Figure 1. Inappropriate and Appropriate Practice (Adapted from Bredekamp, 1986)

Observing a child at play can help a teacher develop a greater understanding of the child.

Some recommended articles include:

Elkind, D. (1986). Formal education and early childhood education: An essential difference. Phi Delta Kappan, 67 (9), 631-636.

Hill, T.W. (1987). Children in the fast lane: Implications for early childhood policy and practice. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2, 265-273.

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Seefeldt, C. and N. Barbour (1988). "They said I had to ..." Working with mandates. Young Children, 43 (4) 4-8.

Southern Association on Children Under Six. (1986). Position statement on quality four-year-old programs in public schools. Dimensions, 12 (4), 25.

Williams, C.K. and C. Kamii (1986). How do children learn by handling objects? Young Children, 42 (1) 23-26.

Zigler, E.F. (1987). Formal schooling for four-year-olds? No. American Psychologist, 42 (3), 254-260.

Figure 2. Articles to keep on file.

Types Of Early Childhood Programs

There are many different types of early childhood programs and no one type has a monopoly on quality. Programs with the same philosophy can be organized in various ways to respond to the needs of different families. Some programs are in operation all day long for parents who are employed. A few programs provide twenty-four hour care while others are in session for only a few hours a day.

Programs also differ in types of sponsorship and by philosophy. Various types of curricular models such as Montessori, High Scope or Bank Street can be operated by laboratory schools, Head Start agencies, educationally oriented day care centers, private nursery schools or public schools. Any of these programs can be of high quality, and can be accredited by an outside source such as the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs. Thus type of sponsorship, length of day and curricular models are not the essentials in determining quality.

Methods Of Evaluating Programs

To further ensure quality in early childhood programs, there must be conscious efforts and planned methods of evaluation. These methods include self-studies which may utilize specific instruments and may lead to accreditation by a specific organization. A thorough program evaluation also incorporates interviews, surveys, focus groups, and other recognized forms of qualitative input from significant entities of the program. Finally, quantitative data on such components as attendance, number of social services referrals, home visits, and so forth should be studied to determine if the needs of children and families are actually being met. This section focuses on the self-study, but other methods of evaluation program quality should be explored.

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Self-Study

Every early childhood program benefits from a periodic self study where every aspect of the program is examined. The self-study is designed to identify strengths of a program so that they can be continued and to recognize the needs so that they can be met.

Guides for Self-Study

There are many good instruments that can be used as guides for the self-study to make sure that an institution does not overlook any important areas. Head Start has intensive program evaluation tools for its programs. Instruments, such as The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, 1980) can be used to examine individual classrooms. Many programs are using the self-study materials published by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, the accreditation branch of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Since the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs has become the fastest growing organization of its type, it is worthwhile to examine the process it uses to accredit programs. The purpose of the Academy is to improve the quality of early childhood programs. The first and most important component of the evaluation process is a self-study conducted by the institution to determine the extent to which it measures up to generally recognized standards of excellence. When the staff of the early childhood center find deficiencies, they have the opportunity to correct them. Thus, the self-study generally leads to improvements prior to the decision to seek accreditation which may follow. Staff and parents as well as the administrators of the program are involved in the study.

Accreditation Criteria

NAEYC has studied published evaluation instruments and research literature in order to devise a list of essential criteria which distinguish exemplary early childhood programs. The resulting criteria range along ten areas from administration to safety and encompass all those items considered important indicators of quality and education for young children. These criteria are described as follows and summarized in Figure 3 (Bredekamp, 1986).

Interactions among Staff and Children. The most basic aspect of a quality program is the interpersonal climate formed by interactions among adults and children. These are characterized by frequent manifestations of respect with adults responsive to children's needs. Adults smile; they are physically at the children's levels, touching them, rocking a troubled child, listening to news from home and encouraging children's spontaneous language. Most of the conversation is with individual children rather than the whole group. Children are helped to develop independence by practicing such skills as hand washing or pouring juice. Guidance techniques include redirection and anticipation of problems as well as encouragement of desired behavior. Extrinsic rewards are replaced by genuine praise used in appropriate circumstances.

Curriculum. The curriculum for the early childhood classroom is evolving, based on the interests and needs of the particular group of children at a particular time. Children themselves are active participants in curriculum construction. The routine of the classroom, the daily schedule and transition times are all elements of a planned curriculum. Planning is based on knowledge of children's interests and needs as well as an understanding of society's collective knowledge and what elements are applicable to the early childhood age. Routines, such as toileting and snack are not considered interruptions in learning but rather vehicles for learning since self-help skills are important in themselves. Records are kept of individual children's specific needs, interests and accomplishments as a basis for curriculum planning. The curriculum is flexible to enable staff to take advantage of unplanned circumstances. Social, emotional, intellectual and physical accomplishments are accorded equal value and all are considered in planning.

Staff-Parent Interaction. The personnel in good programs understand that parents will continue to be the major force in the lives of young children for years to come. The staff in such programs interact frequently with parents, beginning with an orientation to the early childhood program for both parent and child. Parents are provided with a written philosophy and description of policies. Parents are afforded the opportunity to question the teachers whenever they have any concerns and are welcome to visit the center at any time. Close communication between parents and staff, including newsletters, conferences and informal reports of daily happenings, leads to security for children.

The National Academy of Early Childhood Programs administers the only professionally-sponsored, national, voluntary accreditation system for early childhood programs.

COMPONENTS OF QUALITY FOR PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Consider the following outlined components when examining the quality of early childhood programs:

- Interactions among the teachers and children—interpersonal relationships, guidance techniques, teaching relationships, and stability
- Activities—developmentally appropriate, concrete learning experiences
- Teacher-parent interactions—established effective home/school communications
- Teacher development—strong supervision, daily planning, continual education
- Leadership—strong commitment to nurturing care of children, familiarity with community resources
- Space—well-planned usage of space, equipment and arrangement
- Health and safety—constant supervision, safe environment, enforced sick policy, cleanliness
- Nutrition and food—meeting specifications of district's guidelines, informing parents, serving cultural items, arranging relaxed mealtimes
- Evaluation—of children's development, teacher self-evaluation, examination of environment and programming practices, openness to new ideas

Figure 3. Sample components of quality preschool program. (Adapted from Galinsky (1986).

Staff Qualifications and Development. In any program, the staff is the key to quality. Research has shown that those staff members trained in child development or early childhood education have a better understanding of the needs of young children and the philosophy which dictates a developmentally appropriate curriculum (NAEYC, 1984). Since education is not static but ongoing, it is important that the staff continue to develop their skills through formal training. The staff should be oriented to the program philosophy and goals and should have training in health and safety measures including first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Administration. The administrator of the program must be efficient and have some training in business methods. The tone of the center is set by this person who creates an environment which is attentive to the needs of staff as well as children. Policies and procedures are written and careful fiscal records are maintained. Minutes of staff meetings are kept and confidential records of personnel are on file.

Staffing. Enough staff are always on duty to provide for individual attention to children's needs. Substitutes are provided when teachers and aides are absent. Staff members have responsibility for, and develop relationships with, particular groups of children in order to provide for continuity and attachment.

Physical Environment. There is enough space both outside and inside to insure that children are not crowded. The classroom is divided into attractive areas which can be well supervised and where children can choose developmentally appropriate materials from open shelves. Private and "cozy" spots are available where children can safely retreat from the group. The surroundings are clean, comfortable, and safe, with adequate lighting. Storage for childrens' and adults' personal belongings is available. There is a well-kept outside fenced playground with a variety of active equipment for large muscle development.

Health and Safety. Health policies are written and strictly enforced. Children and adults have been screened for disease prior to enrollment. Immunizations are up to date. Children are under adult supervision at all times and staff members are alert to their health and safety. Emergency contact information is kept for each child. The staff is familiar with evacuation procedures and conduct periodic fire and natural emergency drills.

Nutrition and Food Service. Meals and snacks are served with attention paid to children's nutritional, social and emotional needs. Eating is a pleasant experience. Adults sit with children and converse with them about their interests. Menus are posted for parents and all food is prepared and served according to legal requirements for food service.

Evaluation. At least once a year, parents are asked to evaluate how well the program meets their needs. The staff is also evaluated annually with written summaries placed in their confidential files. Descriptions of individual children's development are written and used as a basis for future curriculum planning and as records for parent conferences.

Summary

A quality early childhood class combines caring adults, developmentally appropriate activities, a prepared environment, and a flexible curriculum. In a quality program teachers, aides and parents work together, using support services where necessary, to ensure that each child develops socially, cognitively, emotionally and physically to the greatest extent possible.

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Children on climbing apparatus require teachers nearby to ensure safety.

Blowing bubbles is a good cause-and-effect activity outdoors.

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On-going evaluation is essential to improving and maintaining the quality of a preschool program.

Early childhood educators need to be alert to the many opportunities they have to interpret components of a high-quality program to parents.

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